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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MOSCOW 002376

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [RS](#)
SUBJECT: HR ACTIVISTS: SURKOV, NORTH CAUCASUS NOT A PRETTY
PICTURE

Classified By: Ambassador John Beyrle for reason 1.4 (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: In a September 9 meeting at the Embassy, human rights activists told Assistant Secretary Gordon the GOR had poured cold water on hopes for a meaningful way forward by appointing Kremlin Chief of Staff Vladislav Surkov to represent Russia on the planned bilateral commission on civil society. In meetings with the Presidential Council on Human Rights and Civil Society, he continues to lecture activists and call them foreign-funded "jackals." The presence of Surkov on the bilateral civil society commission promises to add further to the challenge of promoting human rights. Activists also pointed to the North Caucasus as an area of particularly significant problems, noting that the situation there had deteriorated, and asserting that the federal government had lost control of the region. In light of all of these problems, the optimism among activists generated by President Obama's July visit has evaporated. However, they still consider U.S. support of their work to be vital. End Summary.

Surkov: You're still jackals

¶2. (C) Although President Obama's July visit to Moscow inspired optimism among the human rights community, the mood rapidly soured during what became an extremely difficult summer for their work. In a September 9 meeting at the Embassy, activists told Assistant Secretary Gordon that even during the July summit the GOR had poured cold water on hopes for a meaningful way forward by appointing Kremlin Chief of Staff Vladislav Surkov, architect of "sovereign democracy," to represent Russia on the planned bilateral commission on civil society. Our contacts consider this to be the classic case of a fox guarding a chicken coop. Yuriy Dzhibladze, director of the Center for Human Rights and Democracy, told Assistant Secretary Gordon that as a member of the Presidential Council on Human Rights and Civil Society, he was now in the "unfortunate position" of seeing Surkov regularly. He said that Surkov takes every opportunity to "lecture" activists about the danger of foreign NGOs, accusing them all of being spies.

¶3. (C) Surkov has also told members of the Council that, as far as he is concerned, notwithstanding Medvedev's positive rhetoric, nothing has changed about relations between the GOR and foreign-funded NGOs. Dzhibladze said that Surkov even alluded to Putin's 2007 appellation of these NGOs as "jackals" hanging around foreign embassies looking for money, and said that he believes this appellation still stands. Foreign-funded NGOs have also received no help from Medvedev's June initiative to ease the registration burden for NGOs. The change in regulations conspicuously did not apply to foreign-funded NGOs, and furthermore Putin's 2008 decree requiring taxation of foreign grants to NGOs still stands. At the same time, nearly all rights NGOs doing

meaningful work in the country must rely to a large degree on foreign funding, due to the lack of a well-developed philanthropic sector in Russia, and due to widespread public lack of support for activism.

North Caucasus tail wagging the federal dog

¶4. (C) On the violence in the North Caucasus, Dzhibladze noted that the situation has seriously deteriorated in recent weeks, and said that rights defenders, journalists, and lawyers in the region were all in significant danger. After the murder of rights activist Natalya Estemirova on July 15, Memorial announced publicly that it had suspended all operations in Chechnya. (Note: Svetlana Gannushkina of Memorial told us July 31 that in reality, Memorial was still keeping people on the ground there, under the radar. End note.)

¶5. (SBU) According to Grigoriy Shvedov of Caucasian Knot, the key point is that the North Caucasus is, for all intents and purposes, no longer to be considered part of Russia. Shvedov told Assistant Secretary Gordon that the federal government has completely lost control of the region. Having created the Frankenstein monster of Kadyrov in exchange for stability in Chechnya, they now have neither control nor stability. There is a rise in home-grown terrorism -- a new factor -- as well as foreign fighters. (Note: Shvedov's claim is backed by an increasing number of news reports coming to us about the appearance of "jihad" in the region. End note.) Even if the GOR became democratic and merciful overnight, said Shvedov, that problem would still be there. Shvedov noted

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that he had just returned from Dagestan, and that his sense was that terrorists were controlling the situation. Given the regrettable "Hobson's Choice" between terrorists and corrupt local government, both the GOR and the international community need a new strategy, beyond merely criticizing the problem. The population is arming itself, and "a real storm is brewing there," said Shvedov, adding that the situation in the South Caucasus is not much better.

Comment

¶6. (C) Euphoria from their July meeting with President Obama has faded, inevitably, as activists already concerned over Surkov's appointment saw comrades of theirs murdered in the North Caucasus in July and August. They continue to hope, however, that high-level U.S. attention to the problems that they face will bring some progress. As we move to start direct dialogue on civil society issues, we can hope that Surkov has sufficient credibility with hard-liners and conservatives to produce constructive accomplishments in cooperation with the U.S. At least one of our contacts suggested that Medvedev's September 11 liberal-flavored "Go Russia!" speech may have been a Surkov product. We will need to watch that the GOR does not play along with the bilateral commission process on civil society issues, while emphasizing social NGOs rather than ones focused on political or human rights issues, eschewing any meaningful reform.

¶7. (U) A/S Gordon has cleared this cable.
Beyrle